Learner Development, Teacher Responsibility

By Kathy Bird

Now, we are told, there are five skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and learner development. The enthusiasts latch onto the new buzzword, buy the nice new books, and practically make it a subject per se, while those less enamoured groan at what they consider to be yet another subject area they will be expected to learn about and deal with.

Learner development arrived much later on the EFL scene than in other areas of education (Manpower Services were instrumental in pushing it to the forefront of education in Britain in the early eighties), and it has to be said that good teachers have always encouraged learners to think for themselves and take control of their own learning-they just didn't have a term for it.

Learner development is not simply concerned with telling students to read more, use their dictionaries, and do their homework; and it is not, and should not be treated as, a skill. It is far more subtle than many of the books written about it would have us believe. Nonetheless, if you are lucky enough to have a period at the start of the course you can use as an induction period, then an awareness-raising package of learner-development activities is ideal, both for the learner and the teacher. But what is more important is the continuous nurturing of self-awareness and self-development in the learners. This should be the active responsibility of the teacher.

There are many facets of learner development, but two in particular should be given a great deal of thought: (a) establishing aims and monitoring progress, and (b) integrating learner development into the existing course.

Establishing Aims and Monitoring Progress

The question here is "Whose aims?" If one asks learners what their learning aims are, they will probably answer, in general terms, that they want to improve any, some, or all of grammar, vocabulary, writing, listening, reading, speaking (recognise them?), while a few of the more enlightened might include pronunciation. These aims are rather too vague.

Learners must learn how to set themselves specific, realistic, and, therefore, achievable aims; otherwise they will not see any progress from their efforts, and will, consequently, get frustrated or disillusioned. The first step must be to help them consider their present performance in order to set their own aims.

The form shown on the previous page helps intermediate and higher-level learners to think about the different areas involved in language learning.

Learners need guidance as to what aims are. Documents like the above are extremely helpful, but leadership by example is the best criterion. When the students are given instructions for a task, get them to say what they think the aims of the task are; when the task has been completed, see if they have changed their minds as to the aims, or can add to them. Doing this increases the learners' awareness of how much can be learnt in a given time, and how they can break down the elements of, say, writing, and hence become more able to home in on particular areas that they need to set their own aims for.

This establishment of aims in the classroom has the added benefits of involving learners in the achieving of aims, and eliminating the discipline problems that can arise when learners can't see why they are doing an activity. Obviously, as time goes on, the teacher has to lead fewer and fewer "What is the purpose of . . . ?" and "Why do you think we're doing . . . ?" stages in the lesson. The learners think for themselves.

The natural extension of establishing aims is keeping records of progress. Both learner and teacher should be encouraged to keep regular records of what the learner can do. Learners need to see at a glance what grades and comments have been earned; they also need to know that the teacher cares enough about them to be interested in their progress. If the teacher is haphazard about marking and record keeping, so will the student be. Marking needn't always be done by the teacher. Self-marking and peer-marking, if done sensitively, are fine as long as some record is kept. Both teachers and students have many other dimensions to their lives outside the classroom, and, without keeping records, how on earth can we as teachers remember what learners have done, and thereby advise and help them? Equally, how can learners remember what they once found difficult but have now achieved a degree of mastery in? Records give learners impetus to get better and provide "proof" of progress.

A simple form (one copy completed by the teacher and another completed by the student) meets this need very well.

Yes, it does take a bit of time to complete, but it is time well spent. Learners become more active in monitoring their own learning and more responsible about doing the work necessary to promote progress. And there is the psychological benefit that ensues from learners knowing that their teacher really cares about their learning.

Integrating Learner Development into the Existing Course

Every area of learning is a learner-development area; hence it is impossible to offer suggestions of ways to integrate learner development into all areas without writing a book. But some examples of techniques that have been found successful in helping to raise learner awareness and increase participation in their own learning are given below.

Some colleagues teaching in the British Council in Thessaloniki introduced a reading half-hour into their weekly programme, and sat and read with the students. What better way of encouraging individual reading for pleasure?

Another colleague took a basket of books to the classroom that students could browse through, select what took their fancy, and then borrow.

Most of us have used a reading diary or book review to encourage reading, and we have used classroom techniques such as matching the beginning and end of stories, predicting what the story is about from cover and blurb, etc., in order to stimulate interest and motivation to read.

But for those who have no inclination to read, or who derive no pleasure from reading in their own language, will these techniques convince them of the value of reading in their foreign-language development? The answer, for those who discover the enjoyment of reading for its own sake, is a resounding yes. We are, however, faced with a number of students who will doubt the value of such receptive learning unless guided to it.

Many of us tell students that the best way to help themselves to make good progress is to read; we take them on a library visit-complete with library questionnaire-or we give them a book review to complete after reading a book of their choice over a holiday. As far as it goes, we are doing our bit for learner development. But it's not really enough. It's not the good students we need to convince, and, often, it's only the good students who will take our advice and borrow and read books.

The others need a great deal more guidance than just good advice. Learner development is the responsibility of the teacher, and enhancing awareness is not really too difficult. It must be said, however, that no matter what the teacher does, there will be some students who will resist any and every encouragement, technique, etc.-and really we must sometimes accept defeat! One of the best ways of encouraging learners to consider why they are doing a particular thing is to set up a discussion session.

When it's time for the students to have their oral test, use the time to promote learner development. Make sure that the students know that, as it's an oral test, you will take no part in their discussion, that you are only going to monitor their oral skills. Make sure you give them some controversial (and not so controversial) statements to discuss-ideally, one statement for each student. For example:

"Reading books is a waste of time; students should only do grammar exercises."

"You can't learn anything from reading -students should only read the texts used in their students' books."

"If you read a lot, you don't need a teacher."

"Reading helps you learn vocabulary and grammar."

"Reading is no good. How can you remember all the words and grammar structures you have read?"

"People who read, write well."

When it's over, you-and they-will have their oral grades, and the students will have a much clearer idea of the value of reading. Such "manipulated" discussions do far more to promote learner development than any amount of teacher advice as to the merits of reading. Learner development must come from the learner. The responsibility for promoting such learner development is the teacher's.

Though the virtues of learner development are extolled, some teachers who have a syllabus and scheme of work to get through in a specified time say they have no time to devote to learner development. If learner development were treated as a separate skill, with specially designed worksheets, then, yes, there would not be time to get through the course. But we should be trying to make learner development part of our normal teaching.

An Example

There are far too many techniques to go into here for encouraging students to develop their own learning skills through the coursebook (and many coursebooks now do excellent work in incorporating some learner development into their books), but one example of how an ordinary lesson can incorporate learner development is given here.

This section from the text Headway Intermediate (Unit 6, page 35, Speaking) deals with groups of people who share the same sort of interests and with what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behaviour for each group.

The section in the book is headed Speaking. The aims of the lesson that follows are (briefly) to provide speaking, listening, and writing practice and to extend vocabulary. The overall learner-development aims are given after each stage.

For Example:

Elicit "people associated with a football crowd," unmasking parts of the OHT as students put forward suggestions-add any suggestions not previously included. Let the students discuss how difficult it is to put words into just one category. There is always some overlap; you can draw arrows to illustrate this. Ask them if this would be a good way to record/remember/review vocabulary.

* LEARNER DEVELOPMENT:
- organising and recording vocabulary

Organise the students into groups. Give them time to "brainstorm" vocabulary and expressions and write them on the mind map; then get a representative of each group to talk about their map.

* LEARNER DEVELOPMENT:
- learning from one another, not just the teacher

Next, *swap the OHTs* (or pieces of paper) around the class and get each group to write a text from the mind map created by another group.

* LEARNER DEVELOPMENT:
- introducing/encouraging peer correction, discussion

When they have finished, *find out whether the students think that this could be a way of organising their thoughts*, clarifying aspects of grammar, associating ideas and vocabulary, and making plans for writing tasks of all kinds-students will often put forward their own learning strategies here.

* LEARNER DEVELOPMENT:
- considering ways of recalling, reviewing, recycling what has already been learnt with a view to using it later
- peer explanations/sharing ideas and swapping learning strategies

If activities like this are done regularly, learners will come to appreciate the benefits of becoming more involved in their own learning.

We teachers have chosen a demanding and difficult occupation for ourselves, but also an extremely rewarding one. By taking the responsibility for helping learners to help themselves, both our job and their learning will be even more rewarding.